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ABSTRACT

In hopes of discovering how to respond to her students' work in a way that heads them toward meaningful revision, a creative writing teacher singles out several categories of student fiction she has trouble responding to and pinpoints common shortcomings of students' early drafts, the way students respond to comments regarding revisions, and genre writers' defensiveness. Teachers' comments and suggestions should be respectful to students, yet useful. For instance, students often become hung up in sentimentality and lack of characterization or detail and become defensive when asked to revise a story that "really did happen that way." Successful comments might encourage further "fleshing out" of some particular moments in the story. The choice of an unreliable main character, a flat predictable sentence style, passive voice, and lack of insight are problems often occurring in "way altered state stories" (involving substance abuse or insanity). Genre writers' early drafts sometimes have a lack of characterization and unrealistic settings or plots. When preachiness and predictable outcomes mar first drafts in "Brady Bunch" style fables, suggestions for revisions should focus on making stories open to various interpretations, without having a clear moral or point. (CR)

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Let's Get Personal: Responding to Creative Writing

Like most creative writing instructors I know, I believe in revision. Looking for allies in classrooms filled with romantics who believe in divine inspiration and write longhand late into the night in dark, bookish coffee houses, I quote Flannery O'Connor, Raymond Carver, any writer I can get my hands on, on the importance of hard, dull work. I resort to bad science: One part inspiration, nine parts perspiration. I am the voice of adult daylight reason.

Mostly I comment on students' early drafts like crazy. I assume revision. I suggest ways to go. And like most creative writing instructors I know, I try to phrase my comments in ways that will be respectful of and useful to my students. But what if we sometimes don't get it? What if we are biased against a genre a student is writing in? What if we are unable to see how our responses might be seen as mean-spirited or simply obtuse? Or do certain kinds of writers remain defensive about their work no matter how careful we are in our responses?

In the hopes of discovering how I can respond to my students' work in a way that leads them toward meaningful revision, and assuming I'm not alone out there in my failures, I have looked at several categories of student fiction I know I have trouble responding to and have examined the following three areas in each category:

1) The common shortcomings of early drafts;

2) The way students have responded to my comments--how they revised or didn't revise;

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3) And finally, I have made some fairly risky generalities about fiction writers who work in certain modes or genres and their corresponding willingness or lack of willingness to get beyond a strict defensiveness.

THE "BUT IT REALLY HAPPENED THAT WAY" STORY

As is the case with most creative writing instructors I know, I ask students not to tell the class if a story is "true" or not for what seem to be obvious reasons. How can we discuss whether a car accident was "necessary" or "appropriate" in an otherwise fairly innocuous story about the day a high school football team won their championship with the knowledge that the story was written as a homage to a best friend who was killed? But, unfailingly, either the student announces, sometimes tearfully, to the entire class that the story "really happened," this information slips out in group discussion or he decides to confide it only to me. As these "But It Really Happened That Way" stories, often revolve around a great loss of some kind, I often find myself at a loss in my response.

The good news about these stories is that the students who write them, while sometimes initially defensive, seem more than willing to work on them until they get them right, perhaps because they care intensely about accurately conveying a certain event, feeling or moment.

Typical problems with first drafts of stories that "really happened" fall under the following headings:

Sentimentality--Emotional events often trigger stock responses, especially for the less experienced student writer.

Lack of Characterization--The student knows these people so well, she sometimes

forgets to clue in the reader.

Lack of Detail--This one always surprises me since if something "really happened," the writer would seem to have a huge number of actual details to call upon. Perhaps details seem burdensome barriers to the climax (the what that really happened) for the writer of this kind of story; maybe once again, the writer simply knows the details so well, he forgets to clue in the reader.

I have been most successful in encouraging revision with "true stories" when I have respected the writer's need to write a certain story and didn't challenge the believability or necessity of whatever dramatic event the story turns on and have instead focused my comments on particular moments in the story that might be both fleshed out and made more particular.

An untitled first draft of a story by Jeannine, a writer in my Introduction to Short Fiction class last fall, focused on a high school Homecoming where both the narrator and her best friend Alison were "up for Queen." The climax of the story occurs when Alison, a popular cheerleader overdoses on speed. Although heartfelt, the first workshop draft was full of generalities and cliches: "When it comes to great friendships, I guess opposites really do attract." "I was grounded and had my head on straight." "A million things were racing through my mind."

The most original and compelling part of the story for me was an almost throwaway scene in which the narrator's mother and "her fellow beauticians," neighborhood women who had only sons, fussed over her as she got ready for the dance.

Instead of beginning with more holistic comments about the entire story first--the way

I usually begin--I focused immediately on the one scene I saw great potential in and suspected she thought irrelevant. It was my hope that she might slow down and begin to look at all the moments in her story as worth her time.

My written comments to Jeannine began this way: "I love the idea of all these women who only have sons delighting in getting your main character ready for the prom. I want more of that scene. Some particular characterization and dialog could really bring it to life."

I talked about her friend's overdose in only very concrete terms--"Could you set the scene in the hospital--sights, sounds?"--hoping she wouldn't become defensive and bring up the tired argument that she couldn't change anything because the story "really happened that way."

Her final draft, "Red Roses," while still not free of sentimentality and cliche was clearly stronger. Her throwaway scene with her mother and her "fellow beauticians," once two sentences, was now a full page long and included clever dialog like the following quote by a Mrs. Johnson: "I should have had a daughter. But Frank insisted that having more than two kids was not 70's."

THE WAY ALTERED STATE STORY

I have had much less success in getting students to revise stories in which the main character is dead drunk, inhaling, shooting up or smoking lots of drugs, or clinically insane. Certainly a good story can be written in which people drink, do drugs or are clearly eligible for institutionalization. Did you ever count the number of drinks consumed in a typical Raymond Carver story? In Michael Cunningham's transcendent story, "The White Angel," a

teenage boy and his little brother drop acid together. Mary McGrory Morris' protagonists are all dangerously close to the edge of sanity. But many promising writers quickly overdose on the possibilities presented by an unreliable main character.

While each story presents different challenges for the reader and writer, there are some common problems with many first drafts of "way altered state" stories:

Flat Predictable Sentence Style--Something about these stories inspires many normally eloquent students to resort to an endless series of simple staccato sentences. It's as if sentence combining would take away from the verisimilitude, as in the following example: "The dartboard was faded and missing cork. It hung above the fireplace on a gray stone wall."

Passive Voice--The writers do not see these characters as being responsible for their actions or emotions in most cases, so why not use passive voice? Because it often sounds odd and stilted as in the following sentence from a story called "Asylum" about an escaped psychotic mental patient: "There wasn't only fear and confusion, there was hunger."

Lack of Insight--Students usually treat their drunk, stoned or insane characters in a fairly one-dimensional way. Sure, a guy may have insights from God that mere mortals will never understand, but he usually doesn't have a favorite breakfast cereal, television show or even a family that helps define him. This character is usually defined strictly in terms of his mental state.

I have been almost uniformly unsuccessful in encouraging writers of these stories to revise meaningfully. I have tried pinpointing certain moments that require huge leaps of faith even for the believing reader as in my following comment about the story "Asylum":

"Carl, why would this man, who has been committed to an institution for murdering his girlfriend in a psychotic rage, suddenly see his 'true' self when an old woman forces him to look in the mirror." I have demonstrated the neat effects of random sentence-combining. I have even praised students' clear knowledge of drugs and their effects on the mind and body. Mostly, though, I have asked them why I should care about the people they're writing about when I don't know anything about them except their drug habits or clinical diagnosis.

I don't usually get any help from my students either. In fact, these stories are generally immediate class favorites, which makes sense. While predictable and tedious to me, they seem rebellious and daring to some young writers. When, in an Introduction to Short Fiction class last semester, I mentioned that I wouldn't mind knowing why a narrator has inhaled, drank and smoked every substance offered to him without so much as an instance of consideration (is he trying to escape from something, for example?) I was immediately told that this is what some people did at parties and that was enough of a reason, and hadn't I ever done drugs or what?

The writer of that story, James, a smart, articulate English major, wrote me a four paragraph defense of his story in lieu of a substantive revision. He began this way: "The revision of 'The Magic Carpet' is partly a product of the criticism and suggestions I received from you and my classmates. Several changes have been made." (Note the use of passive voice as if the writer is as powerless as his main character.) He then goes on to elaborate on what he didn't change: "For instance, I left all the drugs and the intoxication in because I felt that they were pertinent to the story. I intended for the story to be more about the journey than the actual characters." He ends by writing, "I just couldn't change the story

into something I did not want."

Much of his defense of his first draft, while well-written and thoughtful, seems as predictable as his story. And perhaps many writers of "way altered state" stories are not ready to consider their romantic visions of dark, seamy life as anything but original and inspired. But I was genuinely struck by the last line: "I just couldn't change the story into something I did not want." Is this what I had asked for? In some ways, I suppose I had. I wanted a story about a character to whom I could relate. But by being at least as predictable in my response to his first draft as he was in his defense of his final draft, I had obviously failed to convince this writer that he should want this as well. Furthermore, James's comment made me begin to realize how easily and predictably I had fallen into the role of stodgy adult in this whole interchange and wondered if I may have been more useful as a reader if I had been able to somehow reject this role entirely and not allowed this easy dichotomy to occur.

THE STORY FROM ANOTHER PLANET

While I have clearly botched my attempts at encouraging students to revise their "way altered state" stories, I have been only a partial failure in working with students who are writing in clear genres: fantasy, science fiction, detective, historical fiction and romance. The genre writers I have worked with, while remarkably different in their abilities, write first drafts that share some of the following problems:

Lack of Characterization--If James's story is about a "journey" instead of characters, early drafts of these stories tend to be about action instead of characterization. People blow hot and cold. They kill their enemies with swords, grieve their mothers' deaths and fall in

love with complete strangers all within the first five pages.

Unrealistic Settings--Some of these stories take place on other planets or on imagined planets or in some hugely different life system on this planet a way long time ago or in a completely new and scary future. Some take place in the present day in areas where the rich plot ways to get richer in grand mansions while the beautiful, but noble poor struggle away to serve and fend them off in "humble" cottages that are always more carefully restored and appointed than anyplace I have ever managed to live on my income.

Unrealistic Plotting--A lot happens. Fast. To a lot of people. The problem is keeping straight what is happening to whom.

I have had the least success encouraging revision in fantasy and science fiction stories. In a novel writing class I taught last fall, a very dedicated writer working in a genre completely new to me (a colleague at CalState Fullerton calls it "dungeon and dragon writing" or "high fantasy") turned in huge chunks of a trilogy he was writing. As far as I could make out, he had twelve main characters, all of whom were named things like Mola Efeth, Ren Ovridej and Sellur S'aen. Naively, after reading the first draft of his first section, I suggested perhaps a few of his characters might be named things like Steve and Jane so the other names would really stand out, only to receive a mini-lecture on the history and importance of nomenclature in this world. Most of my suggestions, in fact, were calmly dismissed as suggestions given by a reader without a clue about this kind of novel. And, frankly, he was right.

I was quickly overwhelmed with a world so dense and private it supported a sentence like the following one: "Alaric then moved one of his Loremasters from his off board pile to

come across the Startshine Axis to destroy Chahan's Western Battlmage."

I tried. Then I threw down my sword on the Starshine Axis and admitted defeat. "I'm sure I'm not your best reader," I wrote on a barely changed second draft, "but I'm still confused more often than not." What could we learn from each other? We wrote and even read on different planets as he illustrated in his review of a published novel we read in class: "When I read a story about everyday life (no matter how twisted) I am bored."

Like Will, students who write fiction that takes place in other realms often use their deep understanding of the world they have created as a defense of their work and, in my classes anyway, have showed little interest in substantive revision.

While I am as inexperienced a reader of romance as I am of "high" fantasy, I have had somewhat better luck in working with student writers in this genre. Alexandra, another novel writing student, turned in several versions of an excerpt from her novel-in-progress, *Blooming Love*, each version more realized than the next. Exclamation points filled the overwritten pages of her first draft and events, point-of-view and emotions shifted at such a rapid rate, the effect was often unintentionally comic as in the following dialogue:

"There was no reason to worry you while you were finishing school." Hannah pleaded for her daughter's understanding. "Besides, I have come to a decision!"

"And what might that be?" Her jade eyes met her mother's stark face.

Hannah found the words to be unbearable. Flowers by the Bay had been given to her and she was to pass it on. Now she had failed. "I am going to sell."

"No!" Dominiques' nightmare was coming true.

"No! No! No! Alexandra," I thought, my nightmare as an instructor coming true.

What was a girl to do?

I complimented her on her creating a main character with admirable nerve, on sustaining a tough narrative drive and basically asked her to cut all that other stuff out. "Watch cliches and over the top reactions/emotions. I'd like to see more subtly in the way people speak to each other," I wrote, concerned about her potentially fragile spirit even as I handed my copy to her. But, miraculously, she responded by turning in a revision worthy of her hidden skills. A two page chapter expended to eight pages, barely an exclamation point to be found.

I don't know why or if my comments helped her, but she seemed relieved to have gotten over the first draft, aware even as she passed it out that it was schmaltzy. Perhaps her willingness to revise came from her desire to create believable characters, not populate an imaginary planet. I think, too, I was a better reader for her than I was for Will, my fantasy writer. While Alexandra's Dominique and Hannah seemed in some ways as alien to me as Will's Sellur and Ren, I didn't bow out and tell her I wasn't the best reader for her work. Instead, perhaps buoyed by recognizable places and contexts, Huntington Beach, California, a flower shop, I tried my best to plug into this alien world.

"BRADY BUNCH" FABLES

The final category of story I know I have trouble responding to I refer to as "Brady Bunch" Fables. In these stories, the main character starts out by behaving badly (although rarely as badly as the writer perceives her to be behaving) but learns an important lesson by the end. At worst, they are as predictable as a Berenstain Bear's book for preschoolers. (For those of you lucky enough to be unfamiliar with these books, you can get the idea by

their titles which include such gems as, *The Berenstain Bears and Too Much TV* and *The Berenstain Bears and The Truth*.) The problems contained in the first drafts of these stories include the following:

Preachiness--These writers tend to have a clear agenda. Good behavior is good and bad behavior is bad. Not too much room for the rest of us.

Predictable outcomes--The main character behaves badly for two thirds of the story and then learns his lesson at the end when he meets someone who is worse off than himself.

While the writers I have worked with on stories that begin with some of these problems have tried hard to rework them, they have had trouble letting go of their preconceived ideas about what should happen, and their revisions, while often thorough in other ways, rarely address one of my major concerns as a creative writing instructor, that a story should not have a clear moral or point but instead should be open to various interpretations.

One student in my Introduction to Fiction class, Kathryn, turned in a story, "Joy," that began in a promising way with a narrator at odds with the festive Christmas setting she encounters at the local mall. She describes the scene this way: "When someone was going to cut me off, I would usually see their bags first. It was Disneyland with an attitude. I felt like I as just wasting my time, and I couldn't help thinking of other things that I needed to get done." Unfortunately the story eventually turns into the narrator's revelation, upon meeting a lonely, old childless woman watching kids sit on Santa's lap, that she has it pretty good and should stop complaining and be grateful.

In class, I suggested that this "sweet lady" seemed a bit menacing to me and perhaps

she might turn out to be not so sweet, after all. Kathryn smiled sweetly at me. In my notes, I suggested ways of tightening some places where the story seemed a bit slow and wrote, "Try resisting the urge to wrap things up so quickly to create a moral outcome and go with this woman and narrator a little more--see where it leads." Kathryn revised carefully, developing her narrator's character a little more, editing the slow passages. But the old lady remained sweet, a menace to society only in my imagination not Kathryn's.

My experience with writers of "Brady Bunch" Fables have all been similar. These writers work hard, but rarely trust themselves enough as writers to see where their stories might lead on their own. Generally otherwise good students who attend class regularly and keep up with assignments, writers of "Brady Bunch Fables" are perhaps too good at being English students to let go of the idea of thesis and write a story that ideally illuminates but, unlike an essay, doesn't have to set out to prove anything at all.